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ABSTRACT

The purposes of this study are to assess Swedish adults' reading and writing skills so that they can be compared with the corresponding skills of students in the comprehensive and upper secondary schools, and to investigate the extent to which adults' reading and writing activities can be described as satisfactory to their needs. The subjects of this study will consist of random samples of population groups born in 1940 and 1950 and living in five parishes within the municipality of Linkoping. These subjects will take a series of reading and writing tests and will also complete a questionnaire concerning education, occupation, reading habits and preferences, and other matters--all on a single occasion. Collection of data is scheduled to be carried out in the spring of 1975, while analysis and presentation of results will be undertaken during the fall of 1975 and the spring of 1976. (JM)

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SCHOOL RESEARCH newsletter

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Title of project: Survey of certain reading, writing and other communication skills among adults (the VUXENLÄSK project)

Project no.: 449

In progress at: Linköping School of Education, The Institute of Education

Scientific leader: Professor Eve Malmquist

Project leader: Hans U. Grundin, Ph. D.

1 Background

What we refer to as reading and writing ability actually comprises a whole system of skills, the development of which occupies a very long period of time. The fact that people "learn to read" during their first years at school - as Swedish children are expected to do - does not imply that reading ability is fully developed at such an early stage. All it means to say is that children are supposed to have acquired certain basic reading skills, e.g. the ability to read and fully comprehend very simple texts. the

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ability to understand more complicated texts, to adapt one's manner of reading to the nature of the text and the purpose of one's reading, to read critically etc. - these are all skills which can be developed more and more, even in adults (cf. Malmquist 1973). The same applies to a number of different skills which constitute writing ability.

Previous research in Sweden on the subject of reading and writing focused on the first years at school and on studies of beginning reading, problems of reading maturity, reading disabilities at the primary level and so on. Comprehensive research of this kind was, for instance, conducted at the National School for Educational Research in Linköping between 1958 and 1968, under the leadership of Eve Malmquist. No corresponding studies of the reading and writing ability of pupils at higher school levels were undertaken, however, at the National School for Educational Research of elsewhere. As a result our knowledge of developments at these higher levels remained very incomplete.

In order at least partially to remedy this gap in our knowledge of the development of reading and writing ability, the so-called LÄSK-project was carried out at the Linköping School of Education, starting in 1971. The purpose of this project was

1. to provide a more detailed description of the development between the ages of 7 and 19 of certain reading, writing and other communication skills, particularly with regard to the level and rate of development at different ages;

2. to investigate the extent to which comprehensive school and upper secondary school goals with reference to these skills have been attained by the time the students leave school.

The survey was primarily concerned with basic reading and writing skills that practically all young persons can be expected to need, whatever the spheres of activity they choose on leaving school.

The LÄSK-project has already been presented, in School Research Newsletter 1973:2. The project will be completed this year, and the main report, entitled "The Development of Reading and Writing Ability in the Comprehensive School and the Upper Secondary School", is in the process of publication (Grundin 1975).

One of the principal issues of the LÄSK-project has concerned functional reading and writing ability (cf. Malmquist 1969, Grundin 1974 & 1975). Very simply, this term denotes the skill that a person needs in order to be able to "function" in society - in a vocational capacity, as a citizen and as a "cultural person". In other words, it is a skill - or rather, a group of skills - that schools must try to help every single pupil to acquire.

The results of the LÄSK-project indicate that a considerable number of young persons are in danger of leaving the comprehensive school - or even the upper secondary school - without having acquired what can be regarded as functional reading and writing ability. Roughly 15 per cent of the pupils in grade 9 (including those in remedial classes) fail, for instance, to reach the level of achievement attained by the average pupil by the end of grade 6. As yet there is no generally accepted definition of a performance level indicating the minimum functional reading and writing ability required for adults living in Sweden. The results of the LÄSK-project will provide a useful foundation for the continued discussion of this matter, but further studies will have to be undertaken before a more conclusive answer can be given.

Definitions of functional reading and writing ability are closely related to another question that has been studied within the LÄSK-project, namely the question as to whether the reading and writing skills generally acquired in our school system can be regarded as satisfactory. In the course of the LÄSK-project an investigation was undertaken of the degree of correspondence between the teachers' expectations and demands regarding their pupils' ability on the one hand and, the pupils' actual achievements on the other. In many respects there seems to be a fair measure of agreement between the demands of the average teacher and the achievement of the average pupil. The question of what is satisfactory ability is, however, also affected by the demands made on the reading and writing ability of the individual by his environment. The main topic of interest in this respect is the demands of adult life, i.e. the demands confronting people after they leave school.

At present we know very little concerning the demands gererally encountered by adults in our society with respect to reading and writing ability of the present-day adult population. It is hardly possible to establish the reading and writing ability of different adult groups in absolute terms. On the other hand, the skills of adult persons can be studied in relation to the corresponding skills of different age groups among the school population and also in relation to the different skills that adults need.

In view of the deliberations and viewpoints outlined here, there is clearly a need for the LÄSK-project to be followed up in a study of the reading and writing ability of adults. Above all it would appear necessary for a study to be made of the skills possessed by groups of adults which are representative of the entire population, just as pupils in various grades of the comprehensive school are representative of each age group in our population.

2 Purpose

The purpose of this study of the reading and writing ability of adults is

1. to assess different reading and writing skills among adults in such a way that they can be compared with corresponding skills among students in the various grades of the comprehensive school and the upper secondary school;

2. to investigate the extent to which the reading and writing ability of adults can be described as satisfactory in relation to their need of such skills.

Like the LÄSK-project, this project is mainly concerned with the study of what can be classified as basic reading and writing skills needed by practically every member of our society.

3 Disposition

Because the skills of adults are to be compared with the skills of young persons attending the compulsory comprehensive school, it is essential that the subjects constitute a representative sample of the population groups we wish to study. We have therefore arranged the survey in such a way that it is based on random samples of the population groups we wish to study. We have therefore arranged the survey in such a way that it is based on random samples of persons born in certain years (1940 and 1950) and registered as residents within a particular geographical area. Since the resources available to the project have not made it possible for the survey to cover several localities, the sample has been confined to five parishes within the Municipality of Linköping. The sample has been selected by the Central Bureau of Statistics.

The randomly selected subjects will be invited to take part in testings at the Linköping School of Education. They will as far as possible be allowed to decide themselves the most suitable time for the testings (e.g. during evenings or on Saturdays), and each subject taking part in the testings will be remunerated at a rate of just over Skr 25 per hour.

Since it is impossible to predict with any certainty how many of the subjects invited to participate will actually do so, we have not determined in advance the exact number of persons to be invited. Our aim is that the number of subjects in each age group should be approximately equal to the number of students per grade participating in the LÄSK-project, i.e. just above 200. If, however, the terms we can offer prove to be insufficiently attractive, we may have to content ourselves with fewer subjects.

The subjects participating in the project will be asked to take a series of reading and writing tests and also to complete a questionnaire concerning their education, occupation, reading habits, reading preferences and other matters. All tests and questionnaires will be administered on a single occasion. This may involve a greater element of fatigue than in the corresponding testings of students, which testings were divided into two sessions. The alternative to ask the subjects to attend more than one test session might, however, prove inconvenient to the subjects, which in turn could reduce the number of subjects participating in the study.

4 Reading and writing tests

In order to create as good conditions as possible for comparing the skills of the adult subjects with those of various student groups, the same tests as were given in the LÄSK-project are used in this study. In the LÄSK-project, all the participating students from grades 6-9

of the comprehensive school and from the upper secondary school were given a series of nine reading and writing tests which will also be taken by the subjects participating in the VUXENLÄSK-project. The series includes the following tests:

A: Alphabet test (knowledge of the order of the letters in the Swedish alphabet)

AS: Copying test (ability to copy a given text by hand)

LH2: Reading rate test with multiple choice questions interspersed in a continuous text

LT: Cloze test of reading comprehension

PRL1: Test of "practical" reading ability (comprehension of insurance policy)

PRL2: Test of "practical" reading ability (comprehension of tables)

PRS: Test of "practical" reading and writing ability (ability to understand and fill in forms)

PS: Free writing test (ability to express views on a given subject)

RS2&3: Spelling test (ability to spell dictated words).

(The designations of the various tests are the same as were used in the LÄSK-project).

S Questionnaire concerning reading habits, reading requirements etc

The subjects taking the reading and writing tests in the

project (section 4, supra) will also be given a questionnaire comprising questions on the following points:

1) previous education
2) any education or training currently in progress
3) present occupation
4) parents' education and occupations
5) amount of reading done during spare time and working hours respectively
6) amount of writing done during spare time and working hours respectively
7) nature of spare time reading
8) evaluation of one's own reading ability in relation to the demands and requirements of work and leisure respectively
9) evaluation of one's own writing ability in relation to the demands and requirements of work and leisure respectively.

6 Analysis of results

The principal aim of the analyses of the test results and the replies to the questionnaires will be to obtain a fairly detailed description of the skills of the two age groups studied (subjects born in 1940 and 1950) and of the connections between these skills and various background factors such as education, occupation, and reading and writing habits. The test results of the subjects taking part in this project will also be compared to the corresponding results obtained by students in grades 6-9 of the comprehensive school and in the various lines of the upper secondary school.

7 Relation of the project to practical educational problems

Together with the results of the LÄSK-project, the results

of the VUXENLÄSK-project are expected to guide the planning of systematic reading and writing skills training in the senior grades of the comprehensive school and in the upper secondary school, particularly with regard to various basic reading and writing skills. The results from the two projects should also help to provide a sounder basis for the definition of concrete goals for the teaching of reading and writing in our schools, and also for the planning of the basic as well as the further training of the teachers who are mainly responsible for this instruction.

In addition to that, the results of the VUXENLÄSK-project may play an important part in the design of reading and writing instruction for various forms of adult education, particularly as regards the continuing education of adults with few years of schooling. Increased knowledge concerning the communication skills of different groups of adults should also be of great help in the development of curricula, teaching materials etc for adult education in other school subjects.

8 Timetable

The project is planned to continue during 1974/75 and 1975/76. The collection of data will be carried out during the spring term 1975. Analysis and the presentation of results will be undertaken during the autumn of 1975 and the spring of 1976.

9 Address

Inquiries concerning the project may be addressed to the project leader:

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